

Secret Session Set on Allegations Involving Torrijos

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The Senate yesterday agreed to hold a secret session on Feb. 21 to discuss charges that Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos or members of his family have been involved in narcotics smuggling.

This unexpected move was provoked by Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.), who has been pressing the drug-smuggling charge for weeks, though without offering any evidence to tie Torrijos or his relatives to the narcotics trade.

Dole has said that he received last week documents from Drug Enforcement Administration files implicating Torrijos relatives in drug trafficking, but he has not described these documents. He said yesterday he would reveal his information at the closed Senate session.

The Senate's unanimous decision to hold the closed session was a blow to the Carter administration. By making all its relevant records on the drug issue available to the Senate Intelligence Committee and perhaps issuing a cleansed version of drug agents' reports involving Torrijos, the White House had hoped to keep this issue out of the Senate floor debate on the Panama Canal treaties.

Administration officials privately expressed concern that the artificial drama of a "secret" Senate session would tend to exaggerate what they regard as a peripheral if not irrelevant issue in the debate over ratification of the canal treaties.

The session will be secret because both Dole and Sen. Birch Bayh (D-Ind.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, will tell the Senate about information contained in classified government documents.

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Clifford Case (N.J.), ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a supporter of the treaties, said he had seen the government's secret files on Torrijos' alleged drug connections and said they contained nothing that affects the treaties or the U.S. position on them.

The Intelligence Committee investigated the drug issue last year. Bayh indicated yesterday that the committee did see some evidence suggesting a possible connection between Torrijos or his relatives and drug trafficking, but he said "these factors did not influence the negotiating process."

Dole denied that he was raising "a red herring," and he acknowledged the drug issue was a "tangential matter." But he insisted it was relevant:

"If in fact the allegations are true, and there is some drug traffic involving Torrijos, can he be trusted as a guarantor of these treaties?" Dole asked.

After the closed session, "I think it's in the public interest to declassify the documents," Dole said last night.

Allegations that Torrijos' brother Moises was involved in drug trafficking were first published in 1972. According to informed sources, a U.S. grand jury once handed down a sealed indictment of Moises Torrijos for his alleged role in a drug smuggling scheme.

According to government officials who have read the DEA file on the Torrijos family, the mountain of documents includes some unsubstantiated accusations by both agents and informants in Latin America that

Omar Torrijos personally was involved in drug trafficking.

The file contains more persuasive allegations regarding his family's narcotics connections, these officials said.

Torrijos, a general who rose through the ranks of Panama's national guard, its only armed force, holds dictatorial power in Panama. Conservative opponents of the canal treaties have previously attacked him as a dictator and friend of Cuban President Fidel Castro. Some senators have accused him of being a Marxist who takes orders from Moscow and Havana.

Dole went on national television Wednesday morning to raise the drug issue. Producers of the ABC television program "A. M. America" alerted news organizations that Dole would make an important revelation, but in fact he did not.

Agreeing to hold the secret Senate session, Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W. Va.) said yesterday "we must get this matter behind us."

Sen. Jacob K. Javits (R-N.Y.), a proponent of the treaties, urged his colleagues to "keep our eye firmly on the issue. We don't have to prove that Torrijos is an angel—he's not. But please, let's keep our eye fixed on the ball."

"Even if Torrijos had a hand in drugs... his is a good treaty for the American people," Javits said.

The administration will make the same argument.

The secret session will not be held until Feb. 21 because the Senate adjourned yesterday for the Lincoln Day recess, and won't be in session all next week. The special session on the

drug issue will delay Byrd's plan to begin article-by-article consideration of the canal treaties as soon as the Senate reconvenes.

The last time the Senate held a secret session was in July, for a debate on the neutron bomb. In 1975 it held secret sessions on the situation in Angola.